

West Virginia Humanities Council
Fellowship Grants: 20.6.7824
Project Title: WV Religious Music Survey

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Has applicant received a West Virginia Humanities Council fellowship previously? Yes
If yes, give year. 2014

Project Title

WV Religious Music Survey

Project Summary

The WV Religious Music Survey is a multiyear survey of religious music-making in the state of West Virginia. The project seeks both to document the diverse ways that West Virginians use music in their religious experiences and to understand how religion, musical expression, and local histories are intertwined. Drawing upon surveys, interviews, participant observation, and archival research, the project is intended to take a panoramic view of contemporary religious musical life in all its forms and to contextualize that panorama within the deep histories of religious life in the Mountain State.

Humanities Disciplines

Culture/Traditions/HumanEnv, Folklore/Folklife, History, Religion/CompReligion, SocialSciences

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Project Narrative

West Virginia, as with Appalachia on the whole, is a hotbed of religious activity. Churches dot the hillsides in rural communities and line the "church streets" of towns and cities. The place names given by European settlers to the area often recall Biblical locations, and the region's traditional musicians often blend religious musics into their repertoires. According to the Pew Research Center's 2014 U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, 86% of adult West Virginians noted that religion is either "very important" (64%) or "somewhat important" (22%) in their lives. Moreover, 78% of respondents identified as Christians, while a combined 3% identified as practitioners of Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, or "other world religions." Yet the textures of West Virginian religious musical life are difficult to discern among what might appear to be a monolithic block of Mountain State Christians, as the state is home to a staggering array of mainline Protestant, evangelical Protestant, independent, Roman Catholic, and orthodox churches. These institutions bear the traces of the state's history and reflect its ever-shifting demographics, telling us a great deal about the values, attitudes, and histories of the people who participate in them.

The West Virginia Religious Music Survey seeks to understand the diversity of religious life in the Mountain State by listening carefully to the musical practices that take place within religious institutions in towns, cities, and rural communities throughout the state. Drawing upon surveys, face-to-face interviews, participant observation, and archival research, the Survey interrogates the nature of music-making within religious centers in specific detail.

The survey instrument--which has been circulated via the Appalachian Studies Association listserv and the West Virginia Folklife Program's social media, as well as through direct mailing requests in Braxton and McDowell Counties--asks participants to share information about their community's use of published music (such as hymnals or sheet music), the instruments that are used in their worship, and the role of paid and volunteer musicians in their religious activities. Face-to-face interviews offer an opportunity to expand the reach of the survey and serve as vital follow-up opportunities with respondents who have agreed to further conversations. At the present time, forty-four (44) religious institutions have responded to the survey, and ethnographic interviews are slated for March 2020 and beyond.

Archival research, particularly in the West Virginia & Regional History Center at West Virginia University, has provided an opportunity to explore the deep histories of many religious institutions within the state, particularly those that trace their histories back to the nineteenth century. These archives are particularly exciting sources for information about musical performance practice, although they often lack detail regarding the specific repertoires that formed the core of the religious experiences in these houses of worship. As well, available field recordings often focus on the musical practices of rural Protestant churches (cf. Old Regular Baptists) to the neglect of Christian churches in more densely populated parts of the state and region and non-Christian religious communities.

If funded, this Fellowship will permit me to conduct two major ethnographic trips. The first, focusing on the four counties in the Northern Panhandle (Hancock, Brooke, Ohio, and Marshall) and neighboring Wetzel County, will allow me to engage with religious institutions with ties to the myriad immigrant communities that came to work in the region during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. This work will build on the important work that West Virginia state folklorist Emily Hilliard has done with Weirton's Serbian community and WVU history professor Hal Gorby's extensive work on the Polish community in Wheeling by exploring the ways that ethnic musical traditions intersect with religious practice. The second fieldwork trip will take me to the state's southern coalfields, focusing principally on Mingo, McDowell, Mercer, and Wyoming Counties, where I anticipate working closely with members of independent Christian churches throughout the region.

This project has the promise of several significant outputs. Perhaps most significant in the long-term life of this project is the creation of an expansive archive of photographs, survey responses, one-on-one interviews, and field recordings that will serve to document the musical life of the state's religious institutions around the year 2020. These materials will be deposited in the West Virginia & Regional History Center at West Virginia University at the conclusion of the project and will be made available for public use pending the appropriate releases from research consultants. The second significant output to come from this research is an online map that captures research data and presents it in searchable and browsable ways. In Fall 2019, I received funding from the WVU Office of Undergraduate

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Research to train a research assistant to develop a pilot of this map, and we are preparing to migrate it to ArcGIS in 2021 so that we can make more robust use of demographic data provided by the 2020 U.S. Census. Finally, this project will result in a series of journal articles for both academic and general audiences, the first of which will be drafted and submitted for review in late 2021.

West Virginia Religious Music Survey
Travis D. Stimeling, Ph.D.

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